

The Confessor's Tongue for December 15, 2024

25th Sunday After Pentecost; Holy Forefathers of Christ

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

The Two Sundays Before Nativity

The Sunday that falls between December 11-17 is known as the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers. This Sunday commemorates all the ancestors of the people of God, the holy patriarchs living up to the law, given on Sinai, and under the law, - from Adam to Joseph the Betrothed; together with them are commemorated «those who preached Christ» the holy prophets - from Samuel to Zechariah and to John the Baptist, and all the Old Testament righteous men, who were righteous in the faith in the coming of the Messiah. Especially in the service for this day are praised «the pious youths» Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, who «in faith were thrown into the fiery furnace» and «who in the middle of the flames were cooled by the dew of the Spirit and who walked about rejoicing, are mystically a prototype of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ» from the Virgin, who after giving birth remained a virgin. With these holy youths are commemorated also «the righteous Daniel and the wonderful prophets», who, clearly revealing the divine second coming, saw Christ, «coming to all nations as Judge», and who, «your mind illumined by divine radiance», "that clearly the Virgin would give birth represented in mystical images".

Singing in the service for this day «the god-pleasing life» of the Old Testament righteous men, the Holy Church thus represents our intellectual look at the whole universe of great virtues, such as: the God-loving gentleness and meekness of the first martyr in the world, Abel; the holy zeal for the glorification of the name of God, Enos; the high divine thinking and the fear of God, Enoch; the firmness in faith and piety among the general depravity of his contemporary world, Noah; the wonderful faith and obedience to the word of God, Abraham; filial obedience, up to the preparation to be offered as a burnt offering according to the command of God, Isaac; the kind domestic bravery, Sarah; the penetrating maternal love, Rebecca; the mild humility, Jacob, who earned the rage of Laban and Esau; the holy chastity, Joseph, who was more than ready to suffer and die, rather than to sin before God; the unhampered invincible patience in the sufferings and misfortunes, Job; the meek, wise leadership, Moses and Samuel; the inspiring courage through faith, Joshua son of Nun, Barak, and Gideon; the high self-sacrificing love for their country and people, Judith and Esther; the plaintive and contrite repentance, David and Manasseh; the ascetic and divinely intellectual life, Elijah and Elisha; the zeal for the glory of God of the holy prophets; the unhampered invincible dedication to the law of God and usual patriotism of the three youths in Babylon and the rest of the good deeds of all the other Old Testament men we celebrate, «of whom the world was

not worthy» (Hebrews 11:38). According to the teaching of St. Gregory the Theologian, each of these virtues stand by themselves «as a special way to salvation, and undoubtedly results in any one of the everlasting and blessed abodes; for as the generations of life are various, so are the abodes of God are many (John 14:2), and in them are divided and are assigned to everyone according to his worthiness. Therefore let one fulfill his virtue, one to another, the other of the many, and whoever, if it is possible, and in everything; only let everyone go without stopping, let everyone strive forward and follow steadily in the steps of the good leaders, who directly leads a path for him, and makes his way through the narrow gate (Matthew 7:14) to lead to the heights of the blessed heaven.»

Having presented the virtues of the forefathers, the holy Church places in the Gospel reading today the parable about those called to the Lord's supper, inspiring us, that we can be distracted from worthily meeting the Lord by the predominance of flesh over spirit, the attachment to the terrestrial, the blinding by gleam of worldly goods, the predilection for vanity, the unwillingness to deny one's self-love and pride everyday, the enslavement to passions and covetousness. In the Epistle reading, the Church directly commands us to destroy our earthly members: fornication, impurity, passion, evil lust and cupidity, to lay aside anger, evil, blaspheming, slander, lies, and in general to take off the old man and put on the new in the image of the Creator (Col. 3:4-11).

The Sunday that falls between December 18-24, the Sunday before the Nativity of Christ, is dedicated to the memory of the Old Testament saints from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers (see Dec. 11), are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday. *Bulgakov*

Questions at Christmas

St. John of Kronstadt

You are preparing yourselves to meet the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, you must ask yourselves: Have you preserved the spiritual birth from God which we each received in Baptism? Are you always heedful of your Divine sonship and the sacred treasure of the Spirit which you acquired in Baptism? Have you grown closer to God through faith and love, like His beloved children? Have you loved one another as befits children of God? Have you despised evil and all-destructive sin? Have you loved truth and every virtue? Have you loved immortal and eternal life

prepared in a land which will not pass away and to which we are called by Him who now has come to our corrupt earth? These are questions which we must ask ourselves now and decide; not only with our minds, but above all, with our hearts and our very deeds.

The Mystery of Holy Unction

Fr. Thomas Hopko

Christ came to the world to “bear the infirmities” of men. One of the signs of his divine messiahship was to heal the sick. The power of healing remains in the Church since Christ himself remains in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of the unction of the sick is the Church’s specific prayer for healing. If the faith of the believers is strong enough, and if it is the will of God, there is every reason to believe that the Lord can heal those who are diseased.

The sacrament of anointing is a “sobornal” sacrament in the traditional Orthodox practice. This means that as many of the faithful as possible are gathered to participate in the prayers. The rite itself calls for seven priests, seven readings from the epistles and gospels, seven prayers and seven anointings with oil specifically blessed for the service. Although it is not always possible to perform the sacrament in this way, the normal procedure is still to gather together as many priests and people as possible.

The express purpose of the sacrament of holy unction is healing and forgiveness. Since it is not always the will of God that there should be physical healing, the prayer of Christ that God’s will be done always remains as the proper context of the sacrament. In addition, it is the clear intention of the sacrament that through the anointing of the sick body the sufferings of the person should be sanctified and united to the sufferings of Christ. In this way, the wounds of the flesh are consecrated, and strength is given that the suffering of the diseased person may not be unto the death of his soul, but for eternal salvation in the resurrection and life of the Kingdom of God.

It is indeed the case that death inevitably comes to man. All must die, even those who in this life are given a reprieve through healing in order to have more time on the earth. Thus, the healing of the sick is not itself a final goal, but is merely “instrumental” in that it is given by God as a sign of his mercy and as a grace for the further opportunity of man to live for him and for others in the life of this world.

In the case where a person is obviously in the final moments of his earthly life, the Church has special prayers for the “separation of soul and body.” Thus, it is clear that the sacrament of holy unction is for the sick—both the physically and mentally sick—and is not reserved for the moment of death. The sacrament of unction is not the “last rites” as is sometimes thought; the ritual of the anointing itself in no way indicates that it should be administered merely in “extreme” cases. Holy unction is the sacrament of the spiritual, physical, and mental healing of a sick person whatever

the nature or the gravity of the illness may be.

In accordance with our local parish custom, we shall offer the Mystery of Unction for the healing of soul and body here at St. Maximus on Tuesday, December 17 at 6:00 p.m. Unction is open to Orthodox Christians who are in communion with the Church and have had a recent Confession.

Q&A: How to Kiss the Cross

Question: How does one properly venerate the cross the priest holds at the end of Divine Liturgy?

Answer: The Cross is brought out for veneration at the end of Divine Liturgy. We venerate it by crossing ourselves properly: not rushing—holding our first two fingers and thumb together and pressing our ring finger and pinkie against our palm—touching in turn our forehead, belly, right shoulder and left shoulder, bowing, kissing the cross, and kissing the priest’s hand. When we kiss the cross, piety moves us to kiss Christ’s feet, not other parts of His body. We do not omit to kiss the priest’s hand, who serves as a living icon of Christ, who makes Christ’s one high priesthood present in the parish, and whose hand touches the Holy Things. In venerating the Cross in this way, we show respect for Christ who was crucified upon it for our salvation and for His priesthood made manifest in the local parish by the duly-ordained priest. Parents should instruct their children in how to venerate the Cross properly, seeing to it that they themselves set a good example. The priest has noticed a wide variety of practice among those coming to venerate the cross at the end of Liturgy.

Services of the Week Before Nativity

All the services starting the evening of December 19 are services of the Forefeast. This means that they look forward to the Feast and help prepare us for it. After nearly a month’s bombardment of holiday music, advertising, and seasonal decorations in the world, we do well to take advantage of these services of the Church to prepare ourselves for the Feast in an Orthodox manner. The services will help support our fasting for the last and strictest week of the fast. Please note that abundant opportunities for Confession remain before Nativity, and other times may be scheduled by agreement with the priest. *No regular communicant older than age 7 may continue communing who has not been to Confession during the Fast.* Irregular communicants should make every effort to partake of the Holy Mysteries at this time of year. Please see your priest if you have any questions.

Upcoming Events 2024

- 17 December: Holy Unction, 6:00 p.m.
- 21 December: Baptisms, 10:00 a.m.
- 24 December: Nativity Eve Vesperal Liturgy at noon, Vigil at 6:00 p.m.
- 25 December: Nativity of our Lord, 8:00 a.m. Liturgy

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!